

Reaching Reluctant Readers

By [*Richard R. Day and Julian Bamford*](#)

An EFL teacher approached one of us with a question about her students. She said that they were “reluctant readers.” She reported that while they were good students, they had no interest in reading anything in English apart from their required assignments. She wondered what she was doing wrong or what she should be doing that she was not doing. This particular teacher’s situation is all too common. In general, students learning to read English as a foreign language find it a difficult process, and as a result, they do not enjoy it. Even if they are avid readers in their first language, as this teacher said many of her students were, all too often they do not become readers of English.

We believe that reluctant readers can be reached and that they can develop a positive attitude toward reading in English. The first step is to consider the ways in which EFL reading is commonly taught. Traditional approaches and classroom practices, with their focus on translating, answering comprehension questions, or practicing skills such as finding main ideas, tend to ignore the larger context of students’ attitudes toward reading and their motivation to read. The result, inevitably, is students with little or no interest in reading English.

Yet students can discover the benefits and pleasures of being able to read in English. This can happen if extensive reading is incorporated into the EFL curriculum. This article introduces extensive reading as a way of improving students’ attitudes and motivation toward EFL reading as well as improving their proficiency in reading and their English language ability. We explain why easy and interesting reading material is the key factor in extensive reading, and discuss how to gather a library of suitable reading materials and how to encourage students to read them. Finally, we propose several ways of including extensive reading in the EFL curriculum.

An Extensive Reading Approach

The goal of an extensive reading approach is to get students to enjoy reading in the English language. It is an approach that sees reading not merely as translation or as a skill, but as an activity that someone chooses to do for a variety of personal, social, or academic reasons. The following is a list of characteristics of successful extensive reading programs (Day and Bamford 1998:7–8).

1. Students read as much as possible, in class and outside of the class.
2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
3. Students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.

4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding and are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.
5. Reading is its own reward. There are few or no follow-up exercises after reading.
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used during reading because constantly stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
7. Reading is individual and silent. Student's read at their own pace, and outside class, they choose when and where to read.
8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower as students read books and other material they can easily understand.
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the program.
10. The teacher is a role model for students—an active member of the classroom reading community who demonstrates what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

Reading Materials

Getting EFL students to read extensively depends critically on what they read. The reading materials must be both easy and interesting. "Easy" means materials with vocabulary and grammar well within the students' linguistic competence. When students find no more than one or two difficult words on a page, the text is appropriately easy.

In our work with EFL teachers, we find that they are often reluctant to embrace the use of easy, high-interest materials. Even though the mix of difficult and boring materials can be deadly, teachers and students alike often appear to be under the spell of what might be called the macho maxim of reading instruction: no reading pain, no reading gain. This is unfortunate because struggling with difficult, dull material is not the way to become a willing EFL reader. Nor is it, in fact, the most efficient way of becoming an able reader.

Benefits of Extensive Reading

Reading a large amount of easy material has a vital role to play in learning to read fluently. Firstly, it helps wean students away from the word-by-word processing of text, encouraging them instead to go for the general meaning of what they read, and to ignore any details they do not fully understand. Secondly, by meeting the same patterns of letters, words, and combinations of words again and again, students process them more quickly and accurately, thus developing a sight vocabulary (words that are recognized automatically). Consequently, students increase their reading speed and confidence and can give more attention to working out the overall meaning of what they are reading.

In addition, Nation (1997) and Day and Bamford (1998) report that in studies, extensive reading resulted in students' making significant gains in other aspects of foreign language competence such as listening, writing, and vocabulary. For example, in a study of university students who were failing their EFL classes, Mason and Krashen (1997) found that extensive reading helped the students improve their scores on a cloze test.

Undoubtedly, part of the reason extensive reading has a positive effect on language learning is that it provides increased exposure to English. The important role of comprehensible input in foreign language learning has been well documented by Krashen (1989, 1991, 1993). But the impact of extensive reading may also be related to attitude. Many people find learning a foreign language difficult and feel more or less inadequate to the task. Successful foreign language reading experiences can counter such feelings of failure. Indeed, in the study just quoted, Mason and Krashen (1997:93) stated, "Perhaps the most important and impressive finding in this study is the clear improvement in attitude shown by the experimental students. Many of the once reluctant students of EFL became eager readers. Several wrote in their diaries that they were amazed at their improvement." As Nation (1997:16) concluded, "Success in reading...makes learners come to enjoy language learning and to value their study of English."

Materials Selection

The first task for teachers is to find materials that their students will find easy and interesting to read. If money is available, the task of assembling a wide selection of materials is relatively straightforward. When selecting reading materials for any age group and ability level, teachers must have the students' interests uppermost in mind. As Davis (1995:329) stated, "The watchwords are quantity and variety, rather than quality, so that books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit."

High-intermediate and advanced students will probably enjoy reading carefully chosen English language books, newspapers, and magazines. A subscription to a local English language newspaper or one published internationally such as *The International Herald Tribune* or *USA Today* is sure to be appreciated by many students. General interest magazines such as *People*, with its celebrity interviews and gossip, or specialized magazines according to students' interests are also popular. If reading materials are in the students' fields of interest, comprehension is made easier because the students have knowledge of the subject matter.

For less advanced adult and adolescent learners of English, a useful source of reading material is books and magazines produced for native-speaking children and teenagers. Children's books, with big print and colorful illustrations, are relatively easy for EFL learners to read, and some have much to say to older learners. Best of all, they are short and can be read in a few minutes. Children's magazines are also worth investigating, as is popular teen literature. Both are often enjoyed by high-intermediate learners of all ages. Finally, comic books are beloved by all ages.

For beginning and intermediate students, however, the most suitable reading materials are books, magazines, and newspapers, especially those written for EFL learners. This literature is published in growing quantity, variety, and sophistication by both local and global publishers. There are hundreds of attractive fiction and nonfiction books appropriate to students of various

ages and interests, including folk tales and science fiction, thrillers adapted from best-selling writers, classics, travel guides, and novels based on popular movies or TV shows. Titles of books are listed in the catalogs of such publishers as Oxford University Press, Longman, and Heinemann. To make selection easier, the appendix of Day and Bamford (1998:174–217) includes a bibliography of 600 titles of high-quality language learner literature in English divided by student ability level.

No less than for older learners, reading material for children learning English must be chosen so that it will be both understood and enjoyed. Carefully selected books of children's literature can provide the core of a library, and both Brown (1994) and Allen (1994:128–131) have lengthy bibliographies of suggested titles.

When money is scarce, building a library is more difficult but not impossible. If the Internet can be accessed, it can be a source of extensive reading materials. Also, students can produce their own reading material (Derewianka 1997). Students can dictate or write on topics of interest to them, and teachers can consult the students about rewriting, editing, and correcting. The finished products can be read by the rest of the class and by other classes, and the best can be kept in an ever-growing permanent library.

Cultural Considerations

Before introducing extensive reading in the classroom or for homework, the role of the students' culture must be taken into consideration. While reading is ultimately a solitary act by an individual, each culture has its own views of what reading is, and why and how it is done. Teaching in a "nonreading" culture, or in one that does not attach importance to reading for pleasure, makes the task of the EFL reading teacher more complex. Smith (1997) suggests such strategies as reading aloud to students, ensuring that books are attractively displayed and available, and forming a book club.

Orientation

Because students have become so accustomed to struggling through difficult English texts, a sudden plunge into a sea of simple and stimulating materials can be disorienting. It might not be obvious to serious-minded students, for example, why reading easy and interesting material should be a part of their EFL education. Nor do students necessarily know how to go about choosing and reading books on their own. It is therefore important for teachers to orient their students to the goals and methodology of an extensive reading program.

If appropriate, the orientation can begin by contrasting extensive reading with intensive or traditional kinds of reading instructions (see Figure 1, Day and Bamford 1998:123).

The orientation should also include the ground rules of extensive reading:

- Select your reading materials based on your interests and reading ability.
- Do not use dictionaries.

- Practice the skills of either guessing at the meanings of unknown words or ignoring them.
- Do not be concerned with every detail. Keep reading in the face of difficulty and go for the overall meaning.
- If a book is boring or too hard, stop reading and find another book.

Such ideas capture the way that people usually read in cultures where reading is widespread. If students are from such a culture, telling them to approach EFL extensive reading in the same way as they read in their first language will make it clearer to them.

Extensive Reading and the Curriculum

Extensive reading can be blended into any EFL curriculum, regardless of the methodology or approach. For example, programs which utilize a reading-skills approach can add extensive reading without comprising the existing goals and objectives. Extensive reading complements a curriculum because it not only helps the program achieve its objectives of teaching students to read and pass examinations, but also it improves students' attitude toward achieving those objectives.

The ideal way to integrate extensive reading into the EFL curriculum is through a separate extensive reading course in which students read and report on their reading to the teacher and other students. However, for the majority of EFL situations, a new course is impossible since there is simply too much to do already. Alternatively, then, extensive reading can be included in the curriculum as part of an existing course, as a noncredit addition to a course, or as an extracurricular activity.

Incorporating a certain amount of extensive reading into a course already in the curriculum, regardless of the content of that course (e.g., reading, writing, speaking), is possible. This is done by adding a requirement that the students read a certain number of books per week or per semester. For example, in a grammar-translation class, the teacher can explain the benefits of extensive reading and how to go about it, and then explain the requirement such as reading one easy book per week and writing a short report on it.

Since class time is limited, most or all of the extensive reading would be done as homework. Reading a book of language learner literature takes between 20 minutes and two hours depending on the level of the book.

The teacher also can make sure students understand that they will be graded on or given credit for the extensive reading assignments. One way to grade students on their extensive reading is to set a scale of credit in relation to the amount they read. This could be done either in terms of books or number of pages read. For example, students who read 15 books a semester could have 15 points added to their final grade.

If there is simply no way whatsoever that class or homework time can be given to extensive reading, a second possibility is for teachers to consider making it an optional part of their EFL

courses. As an inducement to read, teachers could tell their students the rewards of extensive reading: for example, students will enjoy reading, their reading will improve, they will increase the size of their vocabulary, and so forth. The teacher would then encourage the students to read on their own, according to their interests and for enjoyment, and the teacher would keep a record of this reading. Students would need to understand that the extra reading is optional and not a formal part of the course. At the same time, teachers could consider giving extra credit that might influence a student's final grade.

A third possibility for adding extensive reading to an EFL program is through an extracurricular reading club. It could be organized and conducted like other extra activities. It would meet after school and be open to anyone taking EFL courses. A teacher would be in charge. A membership fee might be necessary if suitable reading materials are not available and need to be purchased. Having regular reading activities and goals helps create and sustain motivation and interest. For example, members might meet once or twice a week to give oral reports on books they have read individually. In addition, they might all read copies of the same book silently and individually, and then as a group, discuss it chapter by chapter and help each other with the meaning of difficult words. The club could also organize regular reading marathons in which each student aims to read a certain number of pages during a set period of time. A less structured form of a reading club is a reading/study lounge filled with attractively displayed English books.

After Reading

A teacher can know if students are actually reading and that they understand what they read by having students answer questions. Another common way of checking reading is to require students to write a short summary of what they read. But however convenient such evaluations may be for the teacher, they tend to spoil the enjoyment of reading for students, reducing it to just another school activity. These common types of evaluation give no indication to the teacher of how much a student enjoyed reading. It is far more in the spirit of real-world reading for students to let the teacher or each other know what they felt personally about what they read. Students can write a paragraph or two about their reactions to a book. If the teacher has also read the same book, it will be obvious even from a student's brief comments if a book was read and how well it was understood.

Reaction reports are enjoyable for teachers to read because they give insights into students' thoughts and feelings. They also indicate to what extent a student is developing into an eager reader of English. If teachers respond to students' reaction reports with their own comments or questions, the reports help to establish a reading community in a way that answering comprehension questions and writing summaries never can. Teacher comments on students' reports can range from longer remarks to a simple, "I'm glad you enjoyed the book."

Teacher as Role Model

The EFL teacher introduced at the beginning of this article enjoyed reading both in her own language and in English. Indeed, because she is a reader and knows how pleasurable and useful reading can be, she became concerned that her students did not read in English. Interestingly, the fact that she is a reader can be a part of the solution to her problem, because the best way to

introduce students to the pleasures of reading is to interact with them as a reader as well as a teacher.

Teachers can begin by reading some of the easy English books or other materials that their students are reading. This allows teachers to recommend books to individual students or to the whole class. Teachers might show students the cover and the title of a book and invite them to speculate on what the book is about. They can also tantalize students by pointing out and reading the cover blurb, the brief text that summarizes the story or introduces the book. Some students may not know how to choose an English language book that interests them, and this can be one way of teaching them how to go about it.

Whenever appropriate, teachers can read aloud to the students a paragraph from a book, a poem, a newspaper article, or an item from an Internet site. Teachers can post these and other interesting items on the classroom wall and invite students to do the same. In ways such as these, the teacher acts as a role model of a reader. Together with other incentives, like setting aside a special shelf for the most popular books in the class library and encouraging students to write book reviews for the school newspaper or draw posters for the school library, teachers can build a reading community with their students—a community of people who are enjoying and sharing English reading and are making it a part of their lives.

Conclusion

Most EFL teachers must make sure that their students do well in their courses and pass the required examinations. But at the same time, teachers can achieve the broader goal of helping students become English readers by making sure that they have access to easy, interesting reading materials. This is the first stage in reaching reluctant readers, because it allows students to discover that they can actually read in English and enjoy it. The more students read and the more they enjoy it, the more likely it is that they will become students who both can and do read in English. At the same time, extensive reading supports all aspects of an English language program. As Colin Davis (1995:335) stated, “Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils’ language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present.”

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